

Instruction on Reading Comprehension

Janee Udalla
Minnesota State University, Mankato

Janee Udalla



Janee Udalla is a 7th grade Language Arts teacher at Rockford Middle School-Center of Environmental Studies in Rockford, Minnesota. She has taught there for the last four years. Prior, she taught in Brooklyn Park, Minnesota. Janee received her Bachelors of Science in Communication, Ars, and Literature in 2011 from St. Cloud State University. Janee lives in Elk River, Minnesota and is a mother of three children. Janee's hobbies include reading, crocheting, jigsaw puzzles, and playing the piano. She has played piano since she was five years old and has had the wonderful opportunity of teaching others to play. Janee has gained a lot of new knowledge from her coursework at Minnesota State University, Mankato. She would like to thank her professors for their guidance. She would also like to thank her family, especially her children. She is grateful for her new knowledge in reading, and is implementing many strategies, lessons, and activities into her classroom.

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Many educators have a difficult time coming to a consensus on the effectiveness of various aspects within the field of education. However, there is one concept that most educators agree on: that reading is the foundation of learning (Al Rabeei et al., 2019). In order for students to understand and apply the information they read, they must have strong reading comprehension skills. A major factor in obtaining strong reading comprehension skills is dependent on student engagement with the text (Adomat, 2009). The challenge teachers' often face is determining what type of instruction will improve students' comprehension while encouraging student engagement. Academic achievement is only possible with high engagement. However, a student's level of engagement is based on that student's ability to comprehend. One cannot function without the other (McElhone, 2012). The relationship between engagement and reading comprehension is unbreakable. Reading comprehension is the point of reading and often determines a student's academic achievement and future successes. Yet, many students struggle with comprehension.

Drama-based instruction might be one approach to improve comprehension skills. Examples of drama-based instruction includes Readers' Theater, role-playing, interrogating, and interviewing characters. Drama-based instruction is an imaginative experience that allows students to "enter" the story (Kelin, 2007). In drama-based instruction, students become the characters, they face unknown situations, and explore multiple perspectives and cultures. Participating in drama-based instruction allows students the opportunity to examine the text in a deeper level, experience the story using their whole body and voice, explore complex themes, and make correlations to their own

experiences with the characters. These opportunities may lead to an appreciation of the story with greater comprehension, greater student engagement, and a powerful experience (Kelin, 2007). According to Brown (2017), "when children from three to eight years old have experience in drama-based instruction, they demonstrate greater academic achievement and higher standardized test scores" (p. 164). Once a child is able to "find" their way through a text and become part of the text, their attitude towards reading and learning literature often improves (Sanacore & Palumbo, 2010). This improvement may lead to the love of reading, the ability and confidence to discuss literature, and further students' desire to read outside of school (Adomat, 2012; Mehta-Diston, 2018). The comprehension skills gained through drama-based instruction can also inspire students to have a positive attitude towards learning and allow for a great sense of accomplishment with their learning (Batdi & Batdi, 2015).

Students of all ages can experience the many benefits that comes with drama-based instruction. A component of the reading curriculum for students in primary grade classrooms is oral reading. This reading leads to improved fluency and comprehension. Many educators of secondary students no longer include oral based reading activities, believing that drama-based instruction is geared towards younger students; however, students in the middle school and high school level can benefit greatly from fluency practice. Drama-based instruction impacts students of all grades and reading levels (Goering & Baker, 2010). The type of drama instruction will look different in an early childhood classroom versus primary and secondary classrooms. However, drama-based instruction implemented in all grades can lead to greater reading and comprehension

skills (Brown, 2017; Young & Ortlieb, 2018). Drama-based instruction has been found to be more effective instruction than traditional reading instruction for increasing students' reading comprehension skills (Güngör, 2008). With increased comprehension skills and changed attitudes towards reading, teachers should consider including drama-based instruction within their classes.

Drama-based instruction is a pedagogy that needs to be recognized, encouraged, and incorporated into the reading curriculum (Certo & Brinda, 2011). In order to do so, teacher training of drama-based instruction will be necessary in order for teachers to gain knowledge, be effective in drama-based instruction, and to build their confidence (Toksun, 2019). *Drama for Schools*, is an example of a professional development program or teacher training whose focus is on drama-based instruction. *DFS* provides tools and strategies for k-12 teachers in all disciplines (Dawson & Cawthon, 2011). An example of a professional development book study is *Drama-Based Pedagogy: Activating Learning across the Curriculum* by Kathryn Dawson and Bridget Kiger Lee (2018). Some universities, including the University of Texas at Austin, Gallaudet University, New York University, and Arizona State University, in Tempe, offer process drama-related undergraduate, graduate, and postgraduate degrees for educators (Brown, 2017). There is also a national association, the American Alliance for Theatre and Education and an International Drama in Education Association that focus on student achievement through the arts (Brown, 2017). Some consider reading instruction involving drama to be extravagant, a waste of classroom time, or as a “playtime” for the students and, therefore, it should not take the place of traditional teaching, but others have argued

that “arts education is not a frill” (Rose et al.,2000). To gain the support from parents, administration, and school board members of drama-based instruction, all parties might be invited to observe how children learn and interact through process drama. Educators might also provide documentations of the National Core Arts Standards and specific content standards to specified parties. These documentations will identify how educators are supporting academic standards with process drama (Brown, 2017). Providing documentation and encouraging observation will hopefully gain the support of parents, administration, and the school board.

Educators might believe that classroom drama is comparable to putting on a theatrical production and might avoid it because they fear it will involve time-consuming planning, use of props, and expensive scripts (McMaster, 1998). Unfortunately, this view can discourage educators from using an important teaching tool that can improve students’ reading comprehension skills. However, educators should explore the use of drama-based instruction and the benefits it may provide to their students. The methods teachers implement in the classroom greatly affect the attitudes and learning of their students (Author, 2008). Therefore, the purpose of this article is to identify the benefits of drama-based instruction and describe how to implement drama-based instruction.

Review of Literature

Reading comprehension can be defined in a variety of ways. Traditionally, comprehension has been understood as knowledge of story elements (Adomat, 2012). Over time, the term “comprehension” has expanded in a broader manner and now includes how children can create and express meaning through many different ways of

learning such as making predictions, interacting with text, using background knowledge, and interpreting the meaning (Güngör, 2008).

Many of those same comprehension strategies are needed and used when participating in drama-based activities (Young et al., 2019). When a teacher implements drama-based instruction to teach a text, students have opportunities to make inferences, interact with the text and peers, and use background knowledge to help with meaning (Adomat, 2012). Young (2019) explains that when students participate in drama-based activities they are physically and mentally involved, which means that students are moving their bodies through the stories as they “become” the characters. This type of physical and mental activity allows for a deeper meaning of the story, thus improving reading comprehension. One of the great differences between drama-based instruction and traditional reading instruction is that the reader can *become* a character. The ability to become a character allows the students to experience the world within the story. The student is able to see different perspectives, obtain a deeper and more meaningful theme, as well as an understanding of themselves (Adomat, 2012). Drama-based instruction differs from traditional instruction, because it is a shared experience rather than one-sided participation. When an individual student listens or reads a story, that student creates a personal image in his mind. However, in drama, students can work together to build a group image and enter into the story with other students which allows for the opportunity to experience multiple perspectives and make personalize meanings of the text (Young, 2012; Adomat, 2009). Drama-based instruction is also a shared experience between the students reading and the students or the audience listening to the reading. The reader

participates in the shared experience through fluent or expressive reading while the audience member uses his imagination to comprehend the meaning of the text. The entire process of Readers' Theater is an interactive activity both readers and audience which is why Readers Theater can be such a valuable tool in literacy (Moran, 2006).

In addition to improving reading comprehension through various learning strategies, drama-based instruction reinforces reading abilities that may also contribute to even greater comprehension (Goering & Baker, 2010). Drama-based instruction has been found to help with students' reading fluency, decoding, and prosody (2010). Reading fluency is defined as a student's ability to read at a specific speed (Uysal & Bilge, 2018). Decoding is the ability to accurately recognize words (Jones et al., 2016), and prosody is defined as the reader's ability to bring "life" to the text with great feeling and emotion (Uysal & Bilge, 2018). Students who struggle with one or more of those reading skills need to spend more time in a text (Jones et al., 2016). Drama-based instruction often requires a significant amount of time inside a text. It is not only an opportunity for students participate in the perspectives of the characters, but drama-based instruction is a time when students get to experience the text (Kelin, 2007). The time spent inside a text through dramatic activities can greatly improve the aforementioned skills thus improving comprehension (Kelin, 2007). Readers who have the ability to decode words or are automatic, who are fluent readers, who are readers that use appropriate inflection and expression, and have an increased use of language have developed higher level skills which may improve their comprehension (Goering & Baker, 2010). Decoding, fluency, prosody, and language acquisitions greatly improve through oral reading activities which

improves reading comprehension. Drama-based instruction consists of oral reading activities. Therefore, participating in dramatic oral reading activities has been found to increase students' comprehension (Goering & Baker, 2010).

Outcomes of Drama-Based Instruction

Early-Childhood

Young children in early childhood classrooms are often involved in spontaneous dramatic play (Adomat, 2012). These children are often pre-emergent readers that do not yet have the skills to read and analyze a text. However, because play and imagination is so great during this period, students are able to hear a story and become part of that story (Adomat, 2012). Teachers can build on children's play to engage students in a deeper understanding of the text (Adomat, 2012). When the engagement includes either spontaneous drama-based activities, or teachers structure their instruction with drama, comprehension results have surpassed expectations (Brown, 2017). The earlier a student is exposed to drama contributes to a positive appreciation of reading and increased comprehension with literature (Brown, 2017). Sadly, many kindergarten and first grade classrooms do not offer play-based literacy opportunities which contribute to the foundation of early literacy skills. Due to high stakes testing and standards driven curriculum materials children in early elementary years spend a lot more time preparing for tests on reading, and they spend little time on imaginative play-based experiences. Young students who did not have the opportunity to engage in teacher-led imaginative play did not perform as well as their peers who were given this opportunity (Cavanaugh et.al, 2017). Research has shown that when adults engage in imaginative dramatic play

with young students, not only do the students gain early literacy skills, but may also contribute to students' social and emotional well-being, and ethical decision making (Bruce et al., 2017). It has been found that drama-based instruction improves social relationships inside the classroom, a decrease in the amount of bullying within the school, and a stronger understanding of diverse populations (Joronen et al., 2012). Understanding the "inside world" of people from different walks of life is imperative in the lives of students today. When students have the opportunity to walk in the shoes of characters from different socio-economic factors, a race other than their own, or to see the impact of negativity and hate in specific situations and circumstances, students may then have the ability to be kinder, have a greater sense of compassion and have more empathy towards others (Clyde, 2003). The challenge that face many early childhood teachers is the demand for accountability, performance, achievement, and what is considered effective teaching and learning (Excell & Linington, 2011). These demands force teachers to teach towards the test and offer little time and encouragement for imaginative play and drama-based activities.

Elementary and Middle School

Imaginative play in the late elementary and middle school grades is often not as spontaneous as it is in the earlier years. Teachers need to find ways in which imagination can be incorporated into their reading lesson and engagement can occur. Teachers of elementary and middle school students often report the challenge of engaging students in a text (Adomat, 2009). Studies have found that struggling readers in elementary and middle school believe that reading is a decoding process rather than finding meaning in

the reading (Adomat, 2009). Without the appreciation of the text and the ability to engage and find meaning, students' will continue to struggle with comprehension (Adomat, 2009). Using drama-based instruction in elementary and middle school classrooms can motivate, engage, and allow students to find a deeper meaning in a text (Rose & Androes, 2000). In addition to making-meaning skills, students who engage in drama-based instruction are able to imagine a variety of perspectives, which in turn will help students with ethical decision making and action (Edmiston, 2000). This type of decision making and action may greatly improve America's race relations and all other divisions of peoples. In drama-based instruction students verbally act out the emotions, actions, and behaviors of other characters. This imagination allows students to see how others will act and feel thus helping with self-evaluation of behaviors and actions. This imagination as a young student may have a great impact on their future. The understanding, compassion, and appreciation of others can lead to the coming together of all people, rather than the separation of people based on race, gender, religion, and sexual identities.

High School

Drama-based instruction can look vastly different in a high school setting. However, drama-based instruction can still positively influence students' reading comprehension and engagement (Goering & Baker, 2010). When students participate in reading within a theater type environment, it can contribute to the emotional and intellectual reactions to literature (Certo & Brinda, 2011). Drama-based instruction is a theater-type application, but its focus is on the response to literature not the production (Kabilan & F. Kamaruddin, 2010). The desirable outcome of drama-based instruction is

the improvement of a student's ability to comprehend literature and not on the theatrical performance. Drama-based activities can help struggling readers to "feel" the story, because students report being able to experience the emotions of the characters, the students made personal connections to the text and characters while experiencing comparable emotions, and this experience inside the story changed students' attitudes, improved their confidence, and led to a greater comprehension of the reading (Certo & Brinda, 2011).

Drama-based instruction focuses on the reader's ability to enter inside the literary text. This instruction is found to increase reading comprehension, enjoyment, engagement, and motivation (Adomat, 2012). Just as drama-based instruction allows younger students to imagine emotions and feelings other than their own – which in turn creates a self-evaluation of ethical actions, secondary students also benefit from drama instruction and their moral beliefs of right and wrong (Barone, 2006). It is common to use texts with relevant social issues for teens in process drama. Students are able to see themselves through the way their peers enact specific behaviors dealing in difficult circumstances.

In addition to the social component of drama-based instruction, high school students' fluency skills also improve. Some high school students dread the idea of reading aloud. The ability to skillfully read aloud is connected to students' level of fluency. Usually, fluency is the focus of an elementary curriculum. Many believe that elementary students are "learning to read" and once a student reaches high school, they are no longer learning to read, rather, they are "reading to learn" (Goering & Baker,

2010). This is where drama based instruction can improve students' comprehension, fluency, as well as their confidence in reading. Adding drama-based instruction, such as Readers' Theater to the high school English curriculum, will help those students who struggle with fluency, but it is a group activity, so those students with reading challenges will not be singled out.

Engaging very young students to secondary students in drama-based instruction may lead to a greater sense of identity, academic achievement, confidence in self and in their reading ability (Barone, 2006). The sweat, fear, and tears that many high school students feel when being forced to read aloud, may disappear with the use of drama-based instruction. This increased ability and confidence may have a significant impact on students' futures.

Implementing Drama-Based Instruction

Implementing drama-based instruction can help improve students' reading comprehension and simultaneously increase student motivation.

Readers' Theater and Repeated Reading

Readers' Theater is a type of drama-based instruction, which is an oral performance of a reading. Readers' Theater usually does not consist of props, sets, or costumes, but it is up to the individual teacher's discretion of how the final "performance" will be staged (Kabilan & Kamaruddin, 2010). The focus of Readers' Theater is the expression of one's voice and the ability to "become" one of the characters. By becoming a character, students may gain greater appreciation of the characters thus leading to a deeper comprehension of the story. Readers' Theater is a script which

consists of narration and dialogue. Scripts should consist of thematic messages, important events, main characters, and maintain the plot of the original story. There are different ways to prepare for instruction based upon the students' age and grade level. Teachers may select scripts or write scripts for students. Selecting a script can come from trade books, poetry, fiction, newspaper articles, or any type of text that can be generated into a performance. When selecting a script, the teacher is able to differentiate the scripts to match the reading level of the students (Young, 2014). Teachers that choose to write a script should look for picture books that are visually vivid. This will aide in creating the dialogue and narration. Many students struggle with the ability to visualize or get a mental movie of the story while reading. When a student can see the pictures with facial expressions and body language – they are able to connect and create a more meaningful dialogue based on their own experiences. Teachers also have the opportunity to select or write scripts that focus on a particular content or lesson (Haag, 2018). For example, scripts may revolve around a specific holiday, person, event, or inter-disciplinary content.

Upper elementary and secondary students may have the ability of writing the script themselves. A primary elementary classroom tends to write a script that is much more literal whereas an upper elementary or secondary students write scripts that contain figurative language, humor, and more alterations (Haag, 2018). After reading an original text with the teacher (a text that needs additional student analysis), the students will be put into groups and will write the script. Again, this script often only consists of dialogue and narration. Reader's Theater can consist of a large script with the whole class performing in one performance, or multiple scripts of the same story with fewer

characters will also work within a classroom. Fun and authentic dialogue will encourage greater engagement with all students and determine the emotions and feelings the students are able to take away from the characters. A dialogue consisting of strong emotions allows students to personalize the story, make connections, and gain deeper comprehension. The timeline of Readers' Theater is determined by the length of the script, the amount of in-class reading time, and the reading level of the scripts; however, most teachers devote one week to Readers' Theater within their reading class.

Teachers Role in Readers' Theater

Teachers play a significant role in Readers' Theater. Teachers can enact with Readers' Theater in a variety of ways. However, a description of the common roles teachers' play will be described. The first role of the teacher is to read the entire script aloud. As the teacher reads, the students will have a script in hand to follow along. The teacher's reading should model expression, intonation, and correct pronunciation of unknown words. After reading the script, the teacher will assign roles (characters) to each of the students. The next step in Readers' Theater, is repeated reading. Repeated reading is rereading the text to get a better understanding (Young et al., 2019). Students will repeat their roles in a variety of ways over several days. First, students should read the script quietly to themselves while noting words that they do not know or understand. Teachers should then observe students while paying close attention to pronunciation of words and help with definitions of new words. After students have spent time rereading their roles, students should be grouped with students who have the same roles or with students whose character is in the same scene as each other. This is dependent on the

number of scripts that are used within the classroom. During group readings, teachers will advise students to listen for expression and intonation while their peers are reading.

Peer feedback is vital during this stage of Readers' Theater. Peer feedback will help students understand how others arrived at their understanding of the plot, conflict, and characters, whereas, focusing more on their comprehension and the perspectives of others. Feedback from the teacher may not allow for the same opportunity of multiple perspectives. Students will note each other's expression, fluency, and accuracy of their reading. This is also a time for students to discuss each other's characters, including motivation, impact on plot, conflict, and characterization. This discussion will deepen their comprehension on the text, their individual characters, as well as all characters within the script.

The next part of Readers' Theater is the performance. Performance without the fear of memorization allows students to engage their whole body and their five senses as they become the character. Students do not need to worry about remembering lines or words because they hold the script in their hands, instead focusing on fluency, accuracy, and expression. Students are allowed to let go of their fears of speaking in front of the class. They are on "stage" which most of the time is the front of the classroom. With the support of their peers, encouragement from their teacher, and a greater sense of confidence due to the reading repetition, students who fear public speaking or reading aloud may come alive during a Readers' Theater performance. Some struggling readers become inspired to continue to read because of their increased understanding and great sense of accomplishment they received after a performance. Students will often ask to

“perform” again and again. Readers’ Theater can allow for students to be silly, to “ham it up,” and become empowered all while increasing their reading skills and improving their comprehension. Immediately following the performance, small group and large group discussions will take place. To further the understanding of the text, teachers may switch students’ roles and have them perform different characters after the first performance. This switch will allow for an even deeper comprehension due to the opportunity of experiencing different perspectives. Students gain confidence in their reading ability, which can lead to greater enjoyment and motivation to keep reading, when they participate in individual, partner, and group repeated activities.

Drama Activities Embedded into Instruction

There are a variety of drama activities that can be embedded into early childhood through high school instruction that will lead to a better understanding.

Role-Playing

Role-playing is a drama-based activity that can occur spontaneously with younger children, and it is an activity that can be structured into a teacher’s lesson after reading a text. Small children enjoy make-believe play, and when a teacher reads aloud a story, many children will act out specific scenes and characters during free-play. Students become the characters – they think like them, they try to imitate the voices that they heard from the teacher, and they try to solve the problem or add new problems to the plot. Story reenactment is a way in which children can develop empathy of the characters and their situations, new insight into the characters, important aspects of the plot, themes, and

sequential order of the story (Coney & Kanel, 1997). This play is found to greatly improve a young child's comprehension even before they are able to read.

Teachers can use role-playing before, during, or after a reading of a text. This text can be fiction or non-fiction. Role-playing involves a student becoming a specific character and interacting with other characters. Before reading a text, teachers can give a little background knowledge about the story, characters, and conflict. Students are then able to "enter" into the character's mind and make predictions of how they, as the character, will behave, how they will respond, or what will happen based on the background knowledge. During a reading of a text, the teacher will stop reading and place students into small groups and give students a specific character to role-play. The students will talk to each other about what is happening to their character within the story so far. The teacher will observe the small groups and ask questions that will further the students understanding of each character. Questions to be asked can include: Why did you behave that way? What made you feel that way? What event has happened that impacted you? What do you think you will do next?

A lesson that can take place after reading the entire text, is one which students can be given different roles within the story. The teacher will place students in groups with other students that are role-playing various characters in the story. Teachers can use specific themes for students to discuss as their assigned character (Adomat, 2012). Role-playing as characters within a text enables students to have empathy for the characters, experience strong feelings and emotions, and have a better understanding of

characterization in the story. Another drama-based activity that delves deeper into the complexity of a character is hot-seating.

Hot-seating

As stated by Adomat (2009), “Hot-seating is a drama-based activity that helps students develop a more complex identity of characters within a text” (p. 631). Hot-seating involves asking, interviewing, and interrogating a character within a text. Prior to this activity students need to know how to ask questions. The teacher’s role is to model how to ask appropriate questions that will lead to a deeper understanding. Many students will ask questions that may be based on the story, however, there may be students that will struggle with the conception of quality questions that will allow for greater comprehension. It is up to the teacher to model how to use questions constructively. To start the modeling, the teacher will instruct the students to sit in a circle. The teacher will take on the role of the main character. The students will then ask questions to the character. The teacher will write the questions down and answer the questions if possible. After some questions have been asked, the teacher will write out the answers of the questions that the students asked on the white board or active board. A review of the questions and how they helped better understand the story will be discussed.

After the teacher has modeled and discussed hot seating, the roles will now be reversed. One student will be chosen as the character and the students will ask questions as a large group, or students can be placed into small groups and they can take turns being characters and asking questions. The student that is in the hot-seat (playing the role of the character) must answer the questions as if he is the character. By doing this activity

students will have a greater understanding and a deeper comprehension of the complexity of the character.

Discussion

Incorporating drama-based instruction into a reading class has been found to greatly improve students' levels of reading comprehension (Güngör, 2008). Reading is the foundation of learning, and using drama-based instruction within reading instruction can play a huge impact on the many skills needed to comprehend. Skills such as fluency, accuracy, decoding, prosody, and inferencing are learned during various drama-based activities. Along with academic growth, drama-based activities provide students with greater confidence, increased engagement, and motivation to read (Keehn et al., 2008)). This confidence, engagement, and motivation will carry through a student's school career and beyond (Adomat, 2012; Mehta-Diston, 2018).

Drama-based instruction will look different in classrooms depending on the age, grade level, and reading level of the students. Drama-based activities in the very young pre-emergent reading students can be spontaneous and occur without instruction. The earlier a child experiences dramatic activities with literature, the better prepared the child will be when real reading takes place, and the more apt the child is to discuss literature in a deeper meaning. Drama activities in primary grades and secondary grade levels will need more explicit directions, including modeling by the teacher. The teacher will model through passion, preparation, and the great desire to have their students improve comprehension and appreciate reading in and outside of school.

Drama-based instruction can bring a great change in the classroom environment. Students often look forward to reading. Reading will no longer be an individual struggle to decode words. Drama-based activities are shared experiences, with focus on experiencing the story through the eyes of the characters. Students will interact with their peers, teachers, and an inside interaction with the text. All of these experiences will improve students' comprehension levels. Drama-based instruction is well worth the time and investment. Drama-based instruction is not a waste of precious classroom time, rather, an additional way of reaching many more students. Drama-based instruction is an oral reading performance of literature. This instruction can include repeated reading, Readers' Theater, role-playing, and hot-seat that will engage, motivate, and increase students reading comprehension. Educators of children of all grades and reading levels should implement the various dramatic activities in their classrooms. Students need to experience a text fully – mind and body. This full interaction of a text will increase student engagement, improve reading comprehension, and motivate students to be lifetime learners and readers.

Teachers face many challenges when wanting to implement drama-based instruction. Although, studies have shown the improved level of reading comprehension along with social and emotional growth, many teachers, administration, and parents still struggle with the idea of “play” or “acting” within a classroom.

Novice teachers may be more open to change within the classroom, however, teachers that have taught for more than five years may have a harder time adjusting to change. Professional development in arts integration is looked upon highly within many

teachers, however, in order for teachers to become fully immersed in arts integration, a one-time professional development course will not be sufficient for teachers that lack knowledge of drama-based instruction (Cawthon et al., 2011). Another challenge of many teachers is the lack of support and resources from administration. High-stake testing is what is at the forefront of many administration. Using standards based curriculum and teaching to the test may have a greater impact on administration as to what their teachers should be implementing within the classroom.

More research is needed in many areas of drama-based instruction. Additional research is needed on implementing drama-based instruction with special education students. Research on integrating drama-based instruction into all content areas and as a school wide initiative is an area that also needs further study. How to go about integrating drama into every classroom is buy-in that would need extreme support from administration, school board, and educators. The idea that drama-based instruction plays a role in the ethics of young children has been studied. However, more research is needed on drama-based instruction and the impact on morals and ethics education in adolescent students.

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